

CLAIM AMENDMENTS:

Claim 1 (Original): A column hole cover interposed between a circumferential portion of an aperture of a column hole formed at an instrument panel for insertion of a steering column therethrough and a steering gear box capable of being displaced in a predetermined direction, the column hole cover comprising:

- a cylindrical main body extended in the predetermined direction,
- the main body including a first annular end portion directly or indirectly fixed to the steering gear box, a second annular end portion, and an intermediate portion between the first and second end portions,

- the second end portion including an annular seal,

- the intermediate portion including a expandable/contractible portion capable of being elastically expanded or contracted in the predetermined direction,

- wherein, irrespective of the displacement of the steering gear box, the annular seal is maintained in an elastic pressure contact against the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel by a reaction force of the compressed expandable/contractible portion.

Claim 2 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein the annular seal is slidably movable along the circumferential portion of the aperture

of the instrument panel in association with the displacement of the steering gear box.

Claim 3 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein the maximum compressible amount of the expandable/contractible portion is designed to be greater than the maximum displacement of the steering gear box.

Claim 4 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 3, wherein the expandable/contractible portion has a predetermined amount of compression when the steering gear box is located farthest away from the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel.

Claim 5 (Currently Amended): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein

the annular seal includes ~~including~~ an annular flange,

the annular flange includes ~~including~~ a confronting face in face-to-face relation with the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel, and

the confronting face of the annular flange includes ~~including~~ at least one annular seal lip.

Claim 6 (Currently Amended): A column hole cover according to Claim 5, wherein

the annular flange includes ~~including~~ an outside circumference portion relatively reduced in thickness.

Claim 7 (Currently Amended): A column hole cover according to Claim 6, wherein

the at least one annular seal lip includes ~~including~~ a plurality of annular seal lips arranged in a concentric relation, and

the confronting face of the annular flange includes ~~including~~ a plurality of ribs extended radially to intersect ~~as intersecting~~ the plural annular seal lips.

Claim 8 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein the annular seal has a portion capable of slidably contacting the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel, and is covered with a coat at the slidably contacting portion thereof, the coat containing a low-friction material.

Claim 9 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 8, wherein the coat contains a silicone resin.

Claim 10 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein the annular seal includes a skirt portion, an outside circumference of which is inclined relative to a plane orthogonal to an axis along the predetermined direction.

Claim 11 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein the expandable/contractible portion includes a bellows.

Claim 12 (Original): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, wherein a material forming the main body contains a rubber.

Claim 13 (Currently Amended): A column hole cover according to claim 12 ~~Claim 13~~, wherein the rubber includes an ethylene-propylene-diene rubber.

Claim 14 (Currently Amended): A column hole cover according to claim 12 ~~Claim 13~~, wherein the rubber includes a chloroprene rubber.

Claim 15 (Currently Amended): A column hole cover according to Claim 1, further comprising a ~~an~~ cylindrical spacer interposed between the steering gear box and the first end portion of the main body, the spacer being fixed to the steering gear box and the first end portion of the main body.

Claim 16 (New): A column hole cover interposed between a circumferential portion of an aperture of a column hole formed at an instrument panel for insertion of a steering column therethrough and a steering gear box capable of being displaced in a predetermined direction, the column hole cover comprising:

a cylindrical main body extended in the predetermined direction;

the main body including a first annular end portion directly or indirectly fixed to the steering gear box, a second annular end portion, and an intermediate portion between the first and second end portions;

the second annular end portion including an annular seal having an annular flange, the annular flange including an outside circumference portion relatively reduced in thickness, the annular flange further including a confronting face in face-to-face relation with the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel, the confronting face of the annular flange including a plurality of annular seal lips arranged in a concentric relation, the confronting further including a plurality of ribs extending radially so as to intersect the plural annular seal lips;

the intermediate portion including a expandable/contractible portion capable of being elastically expanded or contracted in the predetermined direction;

wherein, irrespective of the displacement of the steering gear box, the annular seal is maintained in an elastic pressure contact against the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel by a reaction force of the compressed expandable/contractible portion.

Claim 17 (New): A column hole cover interposed between a circumferential portion of an aperture of a column hole formed at an instrument panel for insertion of a steering column therethrough and a steering gear box capable of being displaced in a predetermined direction, the column hole cover comprising:

a cylindrical main body extended in the predetermined direction, and including:

a first annular end portion directly or indirectly fixed to the steering gear box,

a second annular end portion having an annular seal, and

a single intermediate portion disposed between the first and second end portions, and including an expandable/contractible portion that is elastically expandable or contractable in the predetermined direction;

wherein, irrespective of the displacement of the steering gear box, the annular seal is maintained in an elastic pressure contact against the circumferential portion of the aperture of the instrument panel by a reaction force of the compressed expandable/contractible portion;

wherein the second annular end portion and annular seal are disposed closer to the aperture of the instrument panel than are the first annular end portion and the intermediate portion;

wherein the intermediate portion is disposed closer to the aperture of the instrument panel than is the first annular end portion; and

wherein the expandable/contractible portion is located only in the single intermediate portion.